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TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL KIRF VM

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR AND ARCHBISHOP OF HANOI DISCUSS
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, HUMAN RIGHTS AND PROPERTY RIGHTS

REF: A. A) 08 HANOI 1120

B. B) HANOI 88

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR MICHAEL W. MICHALAK FOR REASONS 1.4(B) and (D)

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In a meeting with the Ambassador immediately before the week-long Lunar New Year holiday (Tet), the Archbishop of Hanoi, Joseph Ngo Quang Kiet, stressed the need for the GVN to enhance political rights such as freedom of speech and private property rights. He also declared that a "lack of trust" currently exists between the Church and the GVN and that he doubts the Prime Minister's ability to follow on his newly issued directive regarding the resolution of land disputes for religious organizations. The Archbishop began and ended the meeting with references to the election of President Obama and his campaign for change, citing in particular references to the fight against fascism and communism in the President's inaugural address. END SUMMARY.

Freedom of Speech and Property Rights

2. (SBU) In a January 22 meeting with the Ambassador Archbishop Kiet emphasized, as he has in the past, that Vietnam has made significant progress on religious freedom issues but that problems remained for some Catholics in the Northwest Highlands and elsewhere. He mentioned specifically parishioners in Son La and Hoa Binh provinces who have had difficulties meeting together and celebrating Christmas. He also said that the Catholic Church would like to do more to contribute to Vietnamese society in the areas of education and healthcare. Asked about Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's recent directive regarding religious properties (Ref B), the Archbishop said that while GVN policy may look good on paper, implementation is weak, especially in areas farther from the capital.

3. (SBU) The Archbishop stressed, however, that his main concerns remained a general lack of political rights, most notably restrictions on freedom of expression and on the right to own property. The Archbishop criticized GVN policy on private land ownership and noted that the Episcopal Council had issued a letter to the Prime Minister on September 25, 2008, at the height of the land dispute in Hanoi, on this topic. In its letter, the Episcopal Council urged the government to recognize private ownership of land as an essential component of sustainable development.

A Lack of Trust

4. (SBU) The Ambassador asked about recent comments by the President of the Vietnam Fatherland Front Huynh Dam that relations between the Archbishop's office and the government were good. Alluding to last year's land disputes, the Archbishop responded that "a lack of trust" remains between the GVN and the Church, Huynh Dam's optimistic assessment notwithstanding. He said that there had been some cordial exchanges between his office and the GVN in anticipation of the Tet holiday but he described these as perfunctory visits. He noted that official calls for his removal have subsided,

though rumors of his transfer continued to circulate. "I have told the government that I will serve wherever asked by the Church," he said.

"Change We Need"

15. (SBU) Archbishop Kiet repeatedly stressed the significance of President Obama's election. The Archbishop opened the meeting by noting the President's reference to America's fight against fascism and communism and the United States' long history of supporting human rights and democracy across the globe. He returned to President Obama's election at the end of the meeting, stating that he was very impressed with Obama's motto of "Change we need." He declared that change is needed in Vietnam as well.

Comment

16. (C) Archbishop Kiet's allusions to "change" and references to the inauguration of President Obama were at times elliptical, but his comments regarding property rights and free speech were uncharacteristically blunt. Whatever pressure he may have endured during last year's land disputes -- and they were substantial -- the Archbishop apparently feels relatively unconstrained in addressing sensitive political issues. This stands in marked contrast not just to his earlier, more reserved statements, but to the expressed sentiments of the Archbishop of Hue and other senior Catholic leaders. Since the Vatican seems to be moving towards rapprochement with the GVN, it will be interesting to see whether the Archbishop continues with his more bellicose line or reverts to his emphasis on reconciliation.

MICHALAK